# Funding the Arts in the Rural: Is it time to pay attention to bias and barriers?

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**Abstract**

Rural communities make up 20% of the American population yet receive less than 7% of governmental and foundation funding. In the arts, this gap can be attributed more to historic bias against rural artists and arts communities, as well as systematic distribution methods of funding and resources. By identifying barriers that exist within arts funding pipelines, solutions then can be explored for both the funders and underrepresented rural communities. Most of these solutions lie within the small arts organizations and the artists in those communities. Arts funders and institutions often employ a system of validation as a means to decide artistic excellence, likely unaware that these validators serve as a barrier to artists from rural communities. By looking at sector terminology, this paper will unpack the marginalization of rural communities, and actions that could resolve biases. The use of intermediaries and regional arts organizations to generate support, share knowledge, and cross local sectors locally will be examined. This paper examines all of these systems in order to identify ways to better serve rural communities, as an essential part of the art sector.

Key Words: arts, arts organizations, rural artists, rural arts, marginalized populations, geographic proximity, rural-urban divide

## I. Introduction & Background

At the Central Minnesota Nonprofit Summit in St. Cloud, Minnesota on May 5, 2016, Aaron Dorfman of the National Committee of Responsive Philanthropy wanted the crowd of business owners and organizational leaders to get mad. He stated that while rural communities make up 20% of the American population, they only receive 7% of governmental and foundation funding, and rural-specific terminology is only mentioned in less than 1% of foundation literature. Dorfman called for a "reversing the current of rural philanthropy" (Dorfman, 2016). This paper will explore how his call to action can be translated for the arts community. While Dorfman is referring to funding inequity in all sectors, the same question can be asked of the arts. What could be the cause of some of the funding gaps? These gaps in funding are worthy of exploration, in terms of historic bias of the rural, funding distribution methods, and the collective rural identity

The first issue, and likely the one most difficult to substantiate, is that metro-based organizations and funders assume an historic bias in relation to arts practices in rural communities. Through interviews, surveys, and literature review, this paper unpacks the real and perceived biases found in the arts.

The second theme explored is the systematic distribution of funds and professional arts experiences in rural communities. This section will discuss funders, philanthropists, and professionals in the arts, who have a say in who, what and where validation and funding occurs.

By unpacking historic bias, funding and validation systems, and other rural community realities, this analysis informs the future actions of the arts sector to be more equitable in regard to geographic locales. Also, there is an intention to empower artists and organizations in rural communities to take control over their own resources.

The key question that needs to be answered is how the funding pipeline is preventing equitable monies from getting to rural communities in the arts sector? Surveys and interviews test this question of non-equitable practice in the arts. If funding to rural communities is low because of aesthetic bias or biased distribution methods, then what should the arts, as a sector, do to provide appropriate change?

While barriers exist within funding pipelines, there are solutions for both the funders and those impacted by lack of support. Most of these solutions lie within the small arts organizations and the artists in those communities.

**Rural Communities and Fears of Being Left Behind**

There exists a historic bias against rural communities, in terms of social and political issues. This bias seeps into the arts, impacting artists and arts organizations in rural communities. While there are artists and organizations that break the stereotype of countryside folk, this exploration is more about equitable support, than praising only those who rose to the top.

Trae Crowder is a comedian who became an Internet phenomenon the years prior to the U.S. Presidential election of 2016. His rants and writing fight back to anyone who has been shocked at his liberal stance because of his southern drawl. The book, *The Liberal Redneck Manifesto: Draggin' Dixie Outta the Dark*, written with his fellow comics, Corey Forrester and Drew Morgan, slaps the hands of all points of view, not to rationalize historic realities, but to force people to pay attention to the historical information, the wrongs that were done, the rights that could be done, and the barriers that have been placed to keep the rights from happening.

Crowder rants in his book, providing some context to regional bias:

> You think you know us? You think you got us all figured out down here? Well y'all don't get it. But that's okay. I'll show ya. We'll show ya. Because that's another thing: I'm not some redneck unicorn. I'm not special. There are plenty of liberal-thinking, intelligent country folk out here, and we're tired of people either not knowing or not caring that we're down here, trying to fight against the ignorance and the hate and doing it from the front lines, by God. (Crowder, Forrester, & Morgan, 2016).

Crowder, in his raw humor, exposes the faults and blessings of liberals and conservatives, from throughout the country. His reaction to this "old conversation" is very relevant in today's political climate. Time needs to be given to examine how communities make decisions, react to social situations, or even turnout and vote in elections, there needs to be intelligent conversations about the core reasons we do what we do.

For instance, Ivy Braschear, in an honest and reflective blog post, after the 2016 Presidential election, reveals the core emotional reaction to uncertainty. Braschear (2016) explains, "While our very real fears may manifest themselves in different ways, and while those fears may look and sound dissimilar, they are really the same fears: The fears of being left behind, left out and being turned against" (par. 16). Often, uncertainty comes from lack of security and support. These are things people are willing to fight for, whether it has to do with legislation or money. So, when there is a 13 - 17% gap in funding to rural communities (Dorfman, 2016; Fluharty, 2013; Schweirzewski, 2007) in all sectors, then it is time to pay attention to what the rural may need.

In the arts, support and security comes in many forms. On the national and regional scale, we see funders like the National Endowment for the Arts and state arts agencies. On a local level, in Minnesota, we have regional arts agencies and family foundations, like McKnight and Jerome.

Revenue streams may come from ticket sales, individual donations, facility rental, and workshop fees. Artists have product sales, grants, and teaching contracts. When we look at the local arts organizations and artists, then we see that the overall support for the rural affects the bottom line in a much broader context.

**Positionality**

Because I have done extensive work in Central Minnesota as an organizational leader in rural and non-metro arts organizations, I empathize with the frustrations of leaders outside of the Twin Cities. After completing my education in studio art at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, I soon found myself in Greater Minnesota (a term for the region outside the metropolitan area including Minneapolis, St. Paul, and their suburbs). As a rural artist, I have experienced many benefits, as well as the challenges implied in this paper thus far. Consistently active in the arts community for over 20 years, I have had many opportunities to serve, including volunteering, serving on boards, coordinating public art projects, grant writing, consulting for larger metro-based organizations, and being employed as an executive director. I have been involved with a wide range of organizational activities from small non-profits to the university.

All of this, plus my political experiences of the past several years created the motivation for this research. Politically, I am a progressive, yet I live and work in what are known as conservative communities. I work and live with good people, regardless of our differing political stances. I have had to maneuver a tense political climate long enough to know that there are ways to coexist and make change. I see the importance of this *flyover country* and all its complexities, because it feeds our country as a whole.

Much like Ching and Creed (1997), I believe that the rural should take ownership of what they do, what is authentic, and find support from that point. I am curious how revenue streams

and funding sources can create significant change in small communities, while letting rural communities, and the arts, thrive and sustain their own mission and vision, rather than those of the urban cultural standards.

**Urban-Rural Divide**

A popular term when referring to the rural communities and lack of support is the rural-urban divide. While rural is a geographic designation, it can be analyzed in literal and symbolic ways. To unpack the phrase, this initial part of the literature review will deal with the physical and spatial context, before addressing the historic and symbolic context.

Geographically, the U.S. Census defines everything rural as *not* urban (2017). By making rural opposite of urban, gray areas such as suburbs, small towns, or large consumer centers make this definition difficult. The term rural is “of or relating to the country, country people or life, or agriculture” (Merriam-Webster’s, 2017). Other terms to describe rural includes rustic or regional, as found in Australian or Canadian literature. What also makes the distinction difficult is whether the rural place or people are part of a county, town, or region. Point in case, in 2006, the Rural Policy Research Institute (RUPRI) states that 51% of rural residents, as defined by the U.S. Census actually live in metropolitan counties (as sited in Swierzewski, p. 6). Generally speaking, the low density of people defines rural places, where neighbors are spread out from each other, the land is oftentimes forest, farm or pastoral, and small towns are often many miles apart from each other. For the sake of this paper, urban centers will include metropolitan areas, such as the Twin Cities (St. Paul and Minneapolis, and their immediate suburbs.) Rural and non-metro is used to define spaces outside these urban centers, while they may not be exactly the same thing.

Other physical aspects could influence the rural-urban divide. In Minnesota, highways, county roads, rivers and farmland divide spatial relationships of rural communities, and the traveling between many rural towns are often around 30 miles. In many cases, the transitions between towns are obvious, due to miles of farm fields or industrial parks. This often creates a steady commute for those who work in a town other than their own, and it is simply part of the every day life. The effort to travel to urban centers takes hours, and much expense, to engage with what the urban has to offer.

Historically, due to this physical sprawl of rural communities, there is a lag in technological, informational, and political interactions. This distribution delay is not been a new issue, but continues to be a result of how *new* gets started in the urban, and slowly makes its way to the rural. This phenomenon could be considered historic, but it is also current, even with the dawn of the Internet and more accessible informational systems.

The implications of delayed infrastructure distribution lead to more symbolic, or stereotypical view of the rural. While there is something romantic in the idea of the rural, that seems to be based on the landscape's ability to bring peace and contentment to those enjoying the view. Yet, the rural-urban divide is not physical, but rather, historically tainted by issues of advancement in social, political, and economic connotations.

## Literature Review

In a 2007 report from the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy, Rachael Swierzewski states,

> As different as these (rural) settings are, the shared obstacles among participants often were expressed as having less to do with *rural* per se, and more to do with *isolation* from

the economic, political, and social importance of the American city (Swierzewski, 2007 p. 6).

This perception of the rural as a peaceful place runs parallel to the stereotypes of the rural people, such as their being 'anti-intellectual,' unsophisticated, and lacking of taste (Swierzewski, 2007; Vogelsang, 2016; McDonald, 2013; Woodward & Bremner, 2013). At the same time, the urban consumption takes part in what the rural has to offer: beautiful landscapes and romantic concepts of simplicity (Ching & Creed, 1997; Woodward & Bremner, 2013; McDonald, 2013; Ratcliffe & Smith, 2009; Warr & et al, 2009; Vogelsang, 2016; Carr & Kefalas, 2009). When referring to artist-run initiatives (ARIs) in Australia, Janet McDonald says, "The perceived 'cultural isolation' of regional ARIs by metropolitan-based colleagues is again a symptom of a predominant assumption of deficiency that can deny the perception of legitimacy for sustained regional arts development" (2013). This identifies a form of validation less about the artistic quality and more about geographic locale.

When portrayed in the arts, such as music, film, literature, and visual art, the rural is most often associated with poverty, ignorance, and marginalized themes. It is easy to understand why misconceptions exist. This aesthetic representation then informs a bias often found in conversations concerning the arts. The problem is that rural identity is not judged by those within that given community, but rather from outside. "To speak for rustics without questioning the sources that make this ventriloquism necessary ultimately reinforces the very cultural hierarchies it ostensibly challenges" (Ching & Creed, 1997, p. 11). How these forms of art get distributed is likely up to the producers in the urban. If there is production of culture in rural areas, it is not likely acknowledged until the urban sees its validity. While this point of view may seem to

present the rural as “victim,” it is a necessary aspect when discussing the historic bias of the rural.

As found in Woodward and Bremner, *Learning from the Inland: Redefining Regional Creativity* (2013), there is a connection between bias and the urban acknowledgment of the rural (2013). Woodward and Bremner steer the conversation into the relevancy of place and economy in artistic activity. They acknowledge agriculture, no longer an economic necessity, but as a historic relevance to the rural regions of Australia. The acknowledgement of agriculture as an identity, but no longer an industry, is valuable for research in this concept of *place*. The authors coin a word, *agri-tivity*, which is a cross between the agricultural history of these regions, and where creativity intersects with such agriculture. This is an empowering response to the subject of rural identity for it opens up a series of solutions for rural communities to see the potential of creative work in their communities. It also exhibits the potential of the rural reframing their creative role in a larger economy.

In summary, reclaiming authentic rural identity requires a deep examination of place and storytelling (Scott, 2010; Woodward & Bremner, 2013), as well as ample time, deep thinking, and community self-awareness. Barriers might include funding, human capacity, and audience development, all of which are unpacked in this paper.

## A. Systems of Fund Distribution

In the world of the arts, when funding is discussed, it is natural to only focus on the funding of the arts activities. Yet, when looking at rural communities, it is best to look at funding and resource distribution overall and then how these are implemented in the arts community. When barriers and logistics are clarified, the ways in which methods of distribution impact the arts and artist will become clearer.

**Funding and Resource Distribution**

Funding and resource distribution is a broad subject, but must be examined before discussing the arts sector. Foundations, state funders, and corporate sponsors are examples of funding resources that will be discussed. All of these systems also have sector-specific terminology, assumptions of best practices, and organizational and budgetary requirements that grantees must adhere to yet these standards may not be accessible to all. For instance, Vu Le (2017), executive director for Rainier Valley Corps and blogger-humorist, points to many processes that nonprofit funders have in place that do not take into consideration the issues faced by marginalized communities, specifically communities of color. His concern with capacity issues (stated in the voice of the funder), and how funders are pressuring small nonprofits is problematic:

> 'You guys (the small nonprofit) don't have enough capacity, or strong enough data, and your grant proposal didn't score well enough, so we're not going to help you buy seeds to plant.' And now not just these farmers, but all of us are at risk for starvation. (par. 8).

Much like the marginalized organizations Le is defending, organizations in rural communities lack the capacity to hire the staff to fill the roles of a healthy organization. Le creates a metaphor of the farmer, yet this is literally what the rural faces: If the rural starves, so do the rest of us.

**Granting in Rural Communities**

To begin this essential conversation, we must first examine how rural communities are considered, or not, for foundation funding. In a report with the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy, Swierzewski (2007) provides ample explanation of different funding methods that come from urban-based funders and into rural communities. Factors of capacity,

governance, and relationship-building become barriers for rural communities, as well as other marginalized communities. Swierzewski argues that the philanthropic sector needs to take a step back and understand their standards may be unattainable by rural communities. She sheds light on the following barriers for rural communities, in terms of philanthropy:

- Rural nonprofits have less opportunity to develop relationships with funders
- Assets are mostly found within urban, or suburban, areas
- Proximity to urban centers, and many large funding organizations, is a major barrier in developing relationships
- Organizational capacity is not up to the standards of many grant-making organizations
- Youth out-migration will continue to impact capacity in talent, tax-base, and support of rural organizations and communities
- Specialization is less likely in rural communities and organizations
- Local donor bases, liquid wealth, earned income streams, and tax base are significantly lower than in urban areas
- Major foundations and corporations are less likely to exist in rural communities (Swierzewski, 2007, p. 12-16).

Swierzewski (2007) challenges the philanthropic world to think about these barriers, and develop a plan to help rural communities to thrive, before they disappear. Swierzewski also examines the *intermediary* as a way to provide support to rural entities in both re-granting and/or information sharing. This is a valuable subject to examine, due to its ample use in the arts. Through the use of intermediaries, urban-based funders and organizations provide resources and

knowledge to rural communities. According to Swierzewski, there are some cautionary considerations:

- Intermediaries are often seen as “gatekeepers” or another layer of bureaucracy
- Foundations may sidestep the depth of commitment or fieldwork they might otherwise feel included to engage in
- Grantees sometimes must be accountable to both the foundation and the intermediary; creating more room for confusion, more reporting requirements, and more bureaucracy
- Intermediaries may not be knowledgeable, responsive, or sensitive to local needs and opportunities
- Intermediaries may put their own interests first, compromising their services to the grantee
- Intermediaries can act as competitors for scarce foundation dollars
- Can weaken relationship building between small organizations and artists and larger funders or partners (p. 22-23)

Yet, if these issues are prevented, intermediaries can provide rural communities with the funds, knowledge, and trainings they need to succeed. In the case of the arts, intermediaries could be the regional arts councils, organizations that have a statewide spread but with branches in other regions, or state funding agencies that distribute funds into regions or counties. They are a necessity when programming, funding, or when resources are to be spread over a vast region or population.

## B. Artists and Organizational Realities

After considering the way philanthropic foundations place limitations for marginalized communities, which includes the rural communities, a thorough examination of the way the arts in rural communities are impacted by these barriers is explored. The arts are made up of arts organizations and artists. Arts organizations fulfill various roles, such as presenting and producing art activities. They can focus on arts education, theater, visual art, or professional development. In rural communities, they often fulfill many roles. The artists are often integrated into arts organizations, but not necessarily as *artists.* In this section of the literature review, artists and organizational realities are examined through how artists live and how artists (and organizations that support those artists) are validated. This then reflects on the systematic distributions of support in the arts sector.

### How Artists Live

Art creation and consumption is another way to consider how the arts are supported, over all, and when discussing geographic proximity for rural artists. When considering the art created by rural communities, we must consider the art consumed in those given communities. As mentioned earlier, rural communities widely differ based on how their community is identified. When we consider the economics of rural communities, they range from tourist communities (bringing in many urban visitors) to agriculture communities (feeding our urban centers). Industrial economies also define the community make up, and therefore their overall approach to arts activity. Bunting and Mitchell (2001) identify several factors that allow rural artists to exist in rural places. Production and consumption of art leads to the basic survival of the artisan (Figure 1).

Factors such as urban access, landscape appeal, economic exigency, aboriginal culture, and related economies (Bunting & Mitchell, 2001). Urban access is often defined as being within a daylong driving distance of the urban center, and may have the feeling of a small town, but still has access to suppliers and a large consumer base. Landscape appeal is attractive to both artists and visitors (who may consume an art piece resembling that beautiful view). Beautiful landscapes attract visual artists and writers but ripe with tourists. Artists may benefit creating work to sell to those tourists, providing the tourist with an *authentic* souvenir representing their experience. "As this relationship unfolds, the artists themselves become part of the landscape so desired by consumers with the interrelationship being mutually beneficial to both parties" (Bunting & Mitchell, p. 273). Therefore the artistic excellence is not *art for art's sake,* but rather based on the field of tourism.

Figure 1. Production and Consumption Centers

| | **Description of Locale** | **Proximity** | **As it relates to art** |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Exurban Consumption Centers** | Close enough for the urban tourist, but has the landscape and feel to have have developed from "the synergy between landscape, artist and tourist" | Short drive from urban center (day trip) | *Talents are displayed in a variety of events and venues that serve to attract both a local and visitor market* |
| **Distant Consumption Centers** | smaller communities, housing post-employment (retired) individuals. | More than a day trip | Relies on a non-local market. "Its inaccessible location, however, suggests that tourists (and cottagers) are the major market segment" |
| **Distant Production Center** | Not "remote" locales; smaller, slow growth places; very high incidence of low-income households. | Distant from urban center | Mostly production because of inaccessible location, but some consumption takes place |
| **Aboriginal Production/ Consumption Centers** | Affluent and low poverty; seasonal employment, has more non-aboriginal residents, alongside the equally high proportion of persons engaged in the food, beverage and accommodation business. | Short drive from urban center (day trip) | Mostly consists of performing arts, high specialization, almost no visual arts |
| **Aboriginal Production Centers** | Remote locations, very small, fast growing, over 90% aboriginal | Distant from urban center | Primarily visual arts, exported |

**(Bunting, Mitchell, 2001, pp. 274 -281)**

**Validation in the Arts**

While Bunting and Mitchell (2001) provide a geographic explanation for the development of art practice and consumption, another aspect of artistic development over time are methods of validation. Validation is a form of support that could be considered a way to decipher *value* in work being done. This validation system includes curators, gallery owners, and fellowship panels, who hold the key to rich experiences for artists to build careers.

Yet, rural artists are experiencing a dilemma, as found in the blog essay, *Burn the Maps,* Matthew Fluharty (2015) recalls,

> How valuable, an honest artist asked me once, is exposure on a national platform when most galleries, institutions, and foundations do not yet recognize the validity of the art emerging from the rural cultural conditions, or its place within a larger critical conversation (par. 16).

The systems that judge the work of artists and organizations are a focus in this paper, because they may influence equitable funding and support in the arts. Ideally, artists are judged for the aesthetic quality, statements, and vision of their work, yet without name recognition, institutional validations, and showcase history at prestigious venues, they may be left behind.

Rural communities and arts organizations may face similar issues of validation. Their arts and cultural assets are often compared to urban organizations of a programmatic focus or budget size, yet proximity can impact the following: scope of activity, audience development, audience/artist/staff demographic, industrial and corporate wealth, depleting populations, and dependency on other sectors to sustain community activities and engagement. Therefore, rural communities that simply lack numbers in people, institutions, or businesses, are likely to not see the true potential of certain arts activities or just do without such validation. While it is difficult

to define how these issues can be addressed within the various forms of validation, communities geographically disconnected from appropriate institutions are likely overlooked.

It is important to note that the art world has been historically exclusive more than inclusive, especially when it comes to the arts outside the main stream, which could include rural arts. Also, regional exclusion is an important differentiation too. For example, the Midwest, until recently, was not considered a cultural region. As Ching and Creed (1997) state in their introduction to *Knowing Your Place,* "The very silence surrounding non-urban forms of popular culture provides evidence of a persistent cultural hierarchy that devalues, even erases, the rustic" (p. 8). While this concern was raised 20 years ago, it still has a stinging truth today, especially in a political, economic, and social climate that desperately needs equity, and the rural should not be kept from this conversation.

The importance of this review is to provide a framework for the complexities of the rural. To develop suggestions for implementing new vehicles of funding and philanthropy, we must understand the historic bias that stems from the rural-urban divide effecting funding distribution to marginalized and rural communities, and arts-related economic realities.

## II. Statement of the Problem

While the rural-urban divide exists in all sectors, the arts will be examined from the point of view of the *bottom-up*, rather than top-down analysis. While scrutinizing the funding process, we will also explore ways to expand understanding of the arts as a part of communities other than their own. Through interviews, surveys, and analysis, historic bias, and the practices that keep them intact, will be surfaced. The system of validators (curators, funders, museums, etc.) will also be examined to decide if there are barriers built into traditional arts gatekeeping. Unless a conscious effort is made to understand the rural voice, the arts sector is basing their judgments

on their immediate experience and prejudices. Finally, as a way to balance out the conversation, I will show how rural communities and rural arts can find their true alignment with their funding sources and supporters.

## Research Design and Methodology

Examining past research in the area of rural arts and culture, gathering feedback from contemporary rural artists and arts organizations, and discussing the relevance of the rural/urban divide offers a glimpse into this subculture of rural arts and culture. Online surveys were distributed to rural artists, non-metro arts organizations, and individuals who work(ed) with rural artists. 37 surveys were answered. Surveying rural artists and small arts organizations is a way to get, in their own words, the experiences of perceived bias, historically or currently, and potential barriers in funding or audience development. The questions transition from individual narratives to how they relate to their community and/or arts community, and then how the community relates to the bigger picture of the arts. The intention is to find a way to read their experience of their specific rural arts situation, potentially exposing themes, patterns, or potential of various places.

All qualitative content was gathered and analyzed using unstructured interviewing methodology, meaning that all interviews and surveys approach the questions interrelated with the arts and locale in a non-metro region. Interviews, conducted via phone or in person, included five Minnesota regional arts agencies, six arts organization leaders, three artists (or arts entrepreneurs), one museum director, and two curators. The unstructured nature of the conversations allowed for the conversation to unlock some unexpected concepts that are often require a deeper excavation of the rural arts experience. When an interviewee touches upon

something profound, there is an opportunity for them to expand on the concept in written form, to ensure complete context and accuracy of thought.

## Findings

Qualitative responses were coded into themes that provided some of the complexities of this research. The surveys provided insight to barriers, issues of artistic excellence and professional acknowledgement, and funding issues. The interviews provided valuable context to the issues and history behind various aspects of rural outreach for leaders in this field. Synthesis of this information is best integrated into the issues shared in the surveys, supporting or contradicting that given information.

### Barriers

When asked a variety of open-ended questions, the responses included organizational issues like capacity, leadership, and space availability. Other issues were related to the audiences, artists, and community at large. The responses provided insight into the various barriers, but also, there are reflections of positivity and opportunities.

Capacity is a large concern. A majority of those surveyed self-identified as artists (29), while less than half were administrators of some sort. Of those surveyed, 60 roles are represented since many were filling a variety of roles as an artist, arts administrator, board member, or unpaid staff. This means, that they sometimes have a deeper understanding of various aspects of the arts in their region, giving some in-depth responses that would not be as rich if they only had one perspective. This phenomenon is significant when considering the issues presented in the surveys:

- Burnout of organizational and volunteer leadership
- Lack of staff

- High need, yet low revenue streams
- Geographic sprawl of human resources (volunteers, qualified staff or volunteers, artists) and of audiences

Issues such as space, monetary support and exhibition opportunities seems to be voiced by those supporting visual arts, more so than the performing arts. The community theater programs were mentioned but such programs are often fragile due to a combination of talent, financial support, and audience. Consistent leadership that would hold any of this together is difficult to find, because of low or no pay, according to some of the surveys.

Funding is addressed, yet it seemed to be a concern to only those who have the inside view of financial situation of the organization. When asked why they did not meet the requirements set by certain funders, these were some of the responses:

- *Budget threshold.* They have a budget under a certain amount. For instance, McKnight has a budget threshold of $100,000 to be considered for general operating funding. The Minnesota State Arts Board has threshold of $166,000 for 3 years, to be eligible for state funding.
- *Too broad of a mission.* The organization serves other populations that stray from the arts focus.
- *Geographic Restrictions.* Example from surveys: “Stating that New York State does not qualify for specific funding, because of New York City.” This could also be state, county, or regional lines decided based on a variety of reasons, other than populations served or needs of that population.

- *Religious Affiliation.* Some organizations that have a religious mission may not qualify for state funds. Yet, this is a misunderstanding, based on interviews with regional arts council leadership.
- *No or Few Paid Employees.* When this is mentioned in the survey, it could be that if they had paid employees, they would qualify for the correct budget.

These concerns are simply the reality for many rural arts organizations, not the faults. The lack of budget is linked to the donor base, real estate value, and lack of staff. The broad mission is likely related to the needs of their communities, which may be more than just art. Religious affiliation is often part of the heritage of the community, if not the vehicle that got many arts organizations started (like St. Francis Music Center of Little Falls or St. John's Boys' Choir of Collegeville). The lack of employees could be due to a small budget, donor base, or talent.

**Artistic Excellence and Professional Acknowledgement**

Are artists in rural communities less capable of becoming great artists or contributors to the art sector? This research is meant to get a better understanding of bias in regards to artistic excellence, which is often asked of artists and organizations in grant applications.

The artistic excellence concept seemed to be replaced by *validation methods*. Validation for artists comes in many forms, such as gallery exhibits, theater productions, studio visits, critical reviews, and academic and institutional acknowledgement. A build up of these types of acknowledgement, on any given artistic resume leads to some additional opportunities. When surveyed, artists looked for more opportunities to simply show, perform or refine their work. When the surveys suggested a need for various forms of validation, the reasons are likely because that is how an artist traditionally succeeds.

Various artists and arts organizations stated these concerns:

- Financial support and/or acknowledgement of value of the artist work, or contribution to community.
- Isolation of artists from other artists or supporters.
- Public space for exhibition, performance, or creative exchange.
- Audiences, of any size, to show up and to engage

All of these things are essential to develop artistic excellence, yet, when many miles need to be traveled by both artist and audience, the exchange seems to be the most lacking in the development of their work. While for visual artists and musicians, creation of work happens in isolation so the additional feedback to the art is an essential step in the creative process. Therefore, it is best to look at the qualitative data, and think about the process of the artist, and what they need along the way, rather than focus just on the final product.

**Community Assets and Other Rural Issues Affecting the Arts**

The surveys from this research only provided a broad view of the community assets, where the participants volunteered that information, yet there are some themes to consider in this discussion. One issue is the weakening of an organization without building staff capacity. Another issue is funding of non-arts venues or establishments, like schools and churches. Last is how non-arts issues, like poverty or technological deficiencies, are impacting the arts related organizational health.

The surveys presented some key events and activities that happen within the given community. Often times the comments reflected an *everything for everybody* arts organization that must provide a space and staff to run programs in music, theater, visual art, and arts education. The concerns for staff of these organizations are stated by many of those surveyed.

The reflections around the value of people running the organizations or programs seemed to take priority over the funding it takes to financially support those individuals. The concern for the person and talent means that the individual comes first, over the position they fill or the success they are having as a leader. This compassion and kindness seems natural for smaller and more intimate communities, yet does that really help the bottom line, providing decent wages for talented leadership?

There are many mentions of the K-12 education as an integral part of the overall arts experience for a rural community. This acknowledgement for the importance of art within the schools leads to a concern about arts funding for schools, rather than funding for the organizations. The support for the arts within the school system is not the focus of this paper; yet, it is an important aspect of how we look at arts activity throughout the state. Not every community has an art center, choral, or community theater, but they likely have a school.

When surveyed about arts activity in communities, school art programs and their affect on communities were often mentioned. For instance, cutting of the arts programming in the schools are mentioned, but the concern is blamed on many causes: regional arts councils, school boards, or level of staff dedication. While the real causes of such cuts could vary by regions, it seems like there is little consistency of *why* there is a lack of support. What comes from the surveys is a strong support of arts education because it not only provides arts programming for youth, but also for their families. Schools provide a physical venue for arts education, exhibitions and venues, yet the general sentiment from the surveys imply that this asset is underutilized to provide rural communities with arts programming and experiences.

This makes for a strong case that when the arts, as a sector, sees the school system as a part of the arts landscape of rural communities, not just an educational facility. If there are

discrepancies in support from statewide arts education organizations and there should be more engagement at the regional levels, there should be a stronger effort to secure arts funding. An important question to ask is: How does this lack of arts education affect youth-migration? Youth-migration is a term that comes from various studies on rural populations, and is characterized as the export of youth, after high school, to urban centers. In some cultures, they may come back, but now, as jobs and quality of life deteriorates, youth are not often returning home after college (Carr & Kefalas, 2009). Their arts experiences in the K-12 school system could make a large impact on their desire to come back to that community. Also, if the community does not link the schools to the rest of the community, the missed opportunity also leads youth to not want to return.

In the surveys, arts organizations that have to address non-arts related issues, like poverty or technological barriers, provides a perceived barrier to support from funders. One survey, for instance, focused on huge poverty hurdles her community was facing. This type of problem would likely overshadow the need for art programming, especially if the pre-conceived notion that art is for the elite. Yet, the arts being used as a tool to raise awareness, build partnerships and community, is a possible solution, yet, not mentioned specifically in the surveys. While these larger societal issues may seem like a distraction for traditional arts programming, the issues can lead to new funding sources and create better use of human resources and community collaborators, building a stronger coalition of some sort.

In another survey, the lagging technological resources are barriers for rural communities, regardless of sector. Technology impacts the artists in the form of marketing, website, web-security, and communications. It impacts audiences getting information about events. It is a

barrier that may not be acknowledged enough in the discussions in the arts, but it is definitely an issue in rural communities, in general, therefore should be considered in some of this discussion.

## IV. Discussion

The discussion of arts and the funding pipeline will include the building of artistic excellence, relationship building with funders, artists, audiences, and other considerations. While these subjects will be linear in this discussion, they work cyclically. Artistic excellence is something that is developed over time for individual artists, but an arts organization that facilitates, presents, and instructs arts activities can look at artistic excellence programmatically and over the long run. Relationship building happens over time, but has many different vantage points to consider when looking at rural arts organizations, artists, and communities. Funding and support structures will be examined in relationship to the previous themes.

### A. Artistic Excellence

When discussing artistic excellence, there is a wide range of expectations. Depending on the education, world experience, or artistic vision (and confidence) of an artist, the survey responses are difficult to assess. Yet, when talking to organizational leaders, the conversation of artistic excellence becomes much more reflective, and more removed from the individual artist.

André Heywood, artistic director of the St. John's Boys Choir (SJBC), provided some insight into the building of artistic excellence for youth in rural communities. SJBC is located in Collegeville, Minnesota, a community named for St. John's University. The choir was started by the St. John's Abbey, but now is independent of the both the Abbey and university. Heywood explains the barriers young people face in simply experiencing, what he calls the *peak*

*experience* in their arts educational experience. “The peak experience provides artistic experiences that are of superb artistic quality, contributes to the significant growth of the artist, confirms the artist’s vocation/avocation as a valid and fruitful enterprise, and creates new goals for the artist” (personal communication, March 20, 2017). A peak experience is something that non-metro youth may not experience as much as an urban youth with the same interests, therefore leading them to more opportunities over time, and possibly their lifetime. The reason this peak experience may not be part of the complete experience for the youth in the SJBC is often due to geographic proximity, transportation costs and time, and economic restrictions for the youth, their families, or the organization.

Peak experiences should not be isolated experiences in the life of a young person. Rather, they should be considered part of the big picture of youth development. In the case of the SJBC, a boy is likely to continue in other music programs and arts related activities throughout his life. So not only is he impacted but the communities in which he works and lives are also benefitting from this one part of his life.

For artists, the peak experiences can be found in validation processes. In *Taking the Leap*, by Cay Lang (1998), there is an illustration of a ladder. That ladder offers a simplified version of what an artist needs to accomplish in order to *make it*. Types of exhibition spaces range from the home to the world-class museum, which is at the top of the ladder. Publicity indicators range from friends liking your work, to favorable reviews in national newspapers. As a young artist, this humorous oversimplification may seem like a way to qualify oneself as an artist and define one action as more successful as another (Lang, 1998). Yet, in all seriousness, the fact that most of the peak experiences or publicity opportunities lack in most of the nation can be problematic.

If *making-it* as an artist were dependent on a resume of exhibition, acknowledgements, and/or awards, the rural would naturally fall behind. If the opportunities to either get the knowledge, experience, or network with other artists or validators is more plentiful then the story may be different. This is not to say that the work is not quality, innovative, or worthy of high praise. It just seems to be a difficult predicament to identify the arts in rural communities as a monoculture. Apply the principles provided by Bunting and Mitchell (2001), there should be a reasonable proximity to a rural arts community or organization and opportunities for a concentration of audiences. Some artists are creating work without any consideration for their geographic location. Yet, it can be argued that when artists are trying to develop their voice, the audiences have a large impact on what they do, how they earn income, and how they develop, therefore their pathways to artistic excellence can be determined by their urban proximity. As an assumption, however, this should be questioned: Is the work the artist is creating for the sake of consumption in that given place or is it created for other purposes? When an artist is doing work that is away from the urban center, yet not serving the tourist consumers, then is there not some way to acknowledge this autonomous creative expression?

This exploratory paper does not dig deeply into this issue. When discussing *place* for an artist, geographic location may have everything and/or nothing to do with their art. How they make an income on their art may have little to do with where they buy their home, inherit family land, or develop community relationships. Musicians and visual artists, unless they are in a community that is designed to support them regularly, must travel to earn a living. The theater artist, on the other hand, need to be within close proximity to the urban center, which often houses many theaters, if they want to be available for paid opportunities.

Therefore, geographic proximity has less to do with artistic excellence, but more to do with artistic development and integrity. Artists, especially if they have years of practice, would likely develop a way to explain their decisions to live in a given place. When bias of rural artists comes into play, artists may feel discredited for their decision to live where they choose. The bias also gets in the way of how place influences their work.

**B. Relationship Building Leading to Quality Programming**

When it comes to the artistic excellence of programming that serves an audience, there is often a concern about what the community wants to consume and what the organization wants to present. The disconnect may exist between art and craft or high art and popular culture. This tension exists in many organizations regardless of locale. When the organization has to decide between ticket sales for a popular theater production (like *Shrek* or *Rent*) and another independent production or non-revenue stream (like a gallery exhibit), there is a tension between the business within an arts organization and their mission.

This mission or money dilemma, in a small rural community can be approached in a strategic way, over time. When Ashley Kolka, program director of the Arrowhead Regional Arts Council (Minnesota), reflected on the long-term success of the audience and artist development in arts organizations in Grand Rapids, Minnesota, she narrowed it down to *knowledge building*. She explained that it took 4-5 years to build a mature base of art consumers, through thoughtful programming of a monthly *First Fridays* event, where audiences engaged with artists through exhibits and artist talks. “It’s about building trust. What is the type of work that the communities want to see? Once you build a relationship, then you can challenge the audience. Now [the

various Grand Rapids organizations] are presenting more contemporary and conceptual art" (personal communication, April 1, 2017).

Relationship building is the key in all aspects of community but, when programs are coming from outside a rural community, success will be dependent on friend-raising. Kolka (2017) emphasized the importance of a *lynchpin organization* as a key component in successful arts programming, healthy partnerships, and high quality arts experiences for communities they serve. A well-known marketing guru, writer, and public speaker, Seth Godin shows the lynchpin theory at work, when he speaks of "someone in an organization that is just too valuable to let go" (Myatt, 2011, par. 1). If applied to an arts organization, that organization would be considered, according to Godin, *too unique and valuable* to a community to let it go unsupported or underfunded (Myatt, 2011). A lynchpin is often an artist, who is able to take risks, but also provides the organization with valuable innovation because of their creative thinking, passion, and provocateur tendencies (Godin, 2010). So, is the lynchpin an arts organization or business? Or is it an organization made up of lynchpin artists?

The lynchpin arts organization looks different than a typical arts organization. It does not just do the work within their mission or their building. They are part of the system that depends on them: the city, region, or state. They are also made up not just of their own staff, but hopefully, the ultimate lynchpin individual: the artist. The artist population that surrounds that lynchpin organization may be both a key to their inner workings: serving on committees, teaching classes, coordinating exhibits, etc. They also may be dependent on that lynchpin organization for income, connections, resources, and information. This two-way relationship is the foundation of the valuable lynchpin organization.

A lynchpin organization may look a lot like Springboard for the Arts in Fergus Falls, Minnesota. Their relationship to the Lakes Region Arts Council (LRAC) is key to the success of the artists in the region. Director of LRAC, Maxine Adams reflected on the successes of their regional artists and organizations, thankful to be able to collaborate with a "competent organization" to implement programming geared towards strengthening artists' professional development. Adams says, she is "a funder [and] a paper pusher." It is neither her role, nor her strength, she says, to facilitate the professional and artistic excellence of the artists. This personal and organizational self-awareness led to the necessary capacity building that led to inviting another arts organization into the region to help strengthen the region as a whole (Adams, personal communications, March 27, 2017).

A lynchpin organization also possesses the unique superpower of autonomy, much like the artist. While they still need to consider what the community needs, wants, or can aspire to, they can be in a position that listens to the community differently than a funder. When asked about the partnering components between LRAC and Springboard for the Arts, Michelle Anderson said:

> What was interesting about our partnership was that Springboard was not a granting organization… we had freedom. With no hard-set program agenda in those early days, we could listen very deeply to the community, and as a newer organization, we could ask questions that were perhaps at first naive or basic because we weren't yet rooted in the community. This opened up all sorts of processes and led to the creation of programs that directly invited artists to respond to local issues. And we saw that artists started to become much more relevant to the broader community, since their work invited

> conversations and storytelling about issues, like the future of the historic state hospital, that everyone was connected to in some way (personal communication, April 20, 2017).

Regardless of their exact programming, these lynchpin organizations recognized the necessity to build relationships and create authentic connections that lead to a deeper understanding of their community. The aesthetic actions were not leading the organization, but were the result of this capacity building on the front end.

**C. Funding, Support, and Resource Distribution**

In Minnesota, there is an arts funding pool that includes National Endowment for the Arts funds. The funds from this pool are distributed to the State Arts Board, which also has Legacy[1] funding and monies from State general funds. The total of these funds are then distributed through the regional arts council (RAC) system. With family foundations, like the McKnight Foundation and Jerome Foundation, there are ample opportunities for art support. While the focus of these funds may differ slightly, Minnesota is an exception to the arts funding rule. When interviewed, Matthew Fluharty of the Art of the Rural said:

> When places beyond Minnesota -- places that do not have robust state funding, places that lack the kind of responsible and place-conscious philanthropy present in our state -- people have to work together, and have to innovate in ways that combine self-reliance with highly evolved forms of collaboration. The Legacy Amendment is a model that should be replicated nationally, yet we should also consider how this abundance of funds

[1] The Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund receives 19.75 percent of the sales tax revenue resulting from the Legacy amendment to support arts, arts education and arts access, and to preserve Minnesota's history and cultural heritage. Based on current sales tax revenue, Minnesotans will invest more than $1.2 billion in arts and cultural heritage fund projects and programs over the 25 year life of the tax (http://www.legacy.leg.mn/funds/arts-cultural-heritage-fund)

> can sometimes short-circuit collaborations that would have emerged out of shared values and a shared sense of collaborative potential (Fluharty, M., personal communication April 17, 2017).

Would a compromise in foundational support and Legacy funding impact Minnesota contemporary cultural activity? Are the arts sustainable without these supports or if they were greatly reduced?

Often times, *sustainability* is stated in a grant application or a panel discussion. In a way, sustainability is happening with little or no funding in the form of small organizations or *artists in the woods.* While these individuals or organizations may get some funding, they often fall under the radar due to small budgets, or low capacity, as mentioned in the survey findings. Resources, other than funding, may not be getting to these artists, organizations, or communities because they lack the lynchpin organization that can filter the information necessary for these entities to succeed.

There is something more worth acknowledging with regards to the Springboard for the Arts office in Fergus Falls and their partnership with Lakes Regional Arts Council. The award-winning, innovative reputation of Springboard for the Arts, based in Saint Paul, Minnesota, was invited to the table, adding clout to the grant support for the new office to begin. In this context, Springboard has the reputation that exemplifies the power needed in the arts community. Their funding partners may not have trusted a small group of artists or small organizational leaders to create the same type of program. While this is an assumption, would the way projects are funded through impact statements and previous accountability support this assumption? Would another smaller organization without the name recognition, be able to accomplish the same amount of success or be trusted by the partnering organization?

These questions lead to another aspect of rural organizational capacity. When referring to the survey of arts organizations in rural communities, one of the biggest concerns is burnout. Internal organizational turmoil may result from a small staff, limited budget, or a watered-down mission. Many small community art centers are assumed to be *everything to everybody*, providing arts education, performing arts, gift shops, and exhibitions, yet they do not often have the staff to implement these expectations. Therefore, something has to be compromised: it will either be the quality or quantity of staffing, programming, artistic excellence, or outreach.

This dilemma becomes most obvious when the grant funding or foundation support is judged. State funds and accountability go hand-in-hand. Organizations in non-metro regions are expected to fumble through expectations even though there are non-stated capacity issues in these remote areas. If, then, the review panels consist of individuals not aware of these issues, then the division continues.

Does building capacity mean the same as growing the annual budget? In the case of rural communities, and from the survey results, the answer is most likely no. Capacity looks different for different organizations. A theater may need a lighting crew. A cooperative of visual artists may need a gallery space for regular exhibits. A public art studio may need artists to work and maintain the space. A board of directors may need ample training in governance and financial sustainability. The downfall is this list is likely put on the shoulders of one small rural organization with less than a few staff to keep it going.

When asked if organizations in her region struggle with growing their budget to apply for state arts board or family foundation money, Maxine Adams said, “some organizations don’t want to grow large. They want to stay small so they do what they want to do. It’s more appropriate” (personal communication, March 29, 2017). Organizations do need to know

themselves, their community, and their purpose. Yet, if they choose to stay small, they may stay off the radar of arts activity in the State of Minnesota, therefore reinforcing the assumption that art is not happening in greater Minnesota or rural communities. Having a budget threshold is a factor that may be worth addressing in rural communities. While it is not the job of the Minnesota State Arts Board (MSAB) or family foundations to advertise the arts happenings in small communities, organizations and studios in rural communities, the amount of emphasis we put on those organizations that receive funding from MSAB, McKnight and Jerome, takes away the attention of some innovative, off-the-grid arts activity worth exploring.

An example of a grassroots concert series, that got noticed "too little too late," was found at Aunt Annie's Quilts in Avon, Minnesota. Owned by Lucy Senstad, the quilt shop was a place where she could showcase her discharged dying skills, hand printed fabrics, and fiber art pieces. After a successful art exhibit at the College of St. Benedict's Whitby Gallery, she and her husband decided to buy tickets for a show by Ray Bonneville and see him in southern Minnesota, but changed their minds. Instead, they invited him up to perform in the quilt shop, so they could invite local friends and customers of the store. This started in 2006, and continued for 8 years. Musicians loved the acoustics, hospitality, and audience, so the concert series became a must-stop for musicians from all over the country and world. After 80 concerts (14 Bonneville concerts), Senstad had to close the shop for health reasons.

> We were pretty verbal about having someone taking over the space. We were willing to help keep it going. We didn't want to look at the concerts as a separate business. It was an expense at times, and I'm not complaining about that. Most places are doing it for the love of music. People don't have to travel the cities. It was really good (Senstad, personal communications, March 31, 2017).

The visitors from the cities were “flabbergasted and shocked that nothing exists like this in the cities,” and even the mayor of Avon showed up to the last concert to say that their community could not lose a gem like this concert series. Senstad said, “too little, too late,” with a chuckle (personal communications, March 31, 2017).

Good arts experiences are happening in rural communities. Things are getting started not because of arts funding, but regardless of funding. To look at the “arts organization” and its purpose, in this case of the Aunt Annie’s Quilt Shop concert series, and their relationship to Avon Area Arts, there should be a disclaimer. In the surveys, one of the leaders of Avon Area Arts responded and mentioned the need for leadership. After much consideration and analysis of this research, it could be that there needs to be leadership in the artists, and the organization should be more aware of the lynchpins they have in their artists and venues. When Aunt Annie’s and another major ceramic studio in the Avon region closed, the Avon Area Arts seemed to lose momentum. Not knowing the specifics of the organizational strength, but knowing about the key artists and venues that no longer were part of their programs, there seemed to be a fizzle of community and camaraderie amongst the artists. They need more artists. Period.

Avon Area Arts is not alone. The lynchpin arts organization should do more than just put on concerts and art shows. Rather, rural arts organizations could be actively placing artists into their communities. Temporary artist in residence programs could bring in new ideas and arts experiences, treating the community to something new every once in a while. Inviting art school graduates to set up studio in their small community, where the rent it cheap, the air is clean, and the colleges are within proximity. The rural arts organization can be thinking of more than just

their bottom line, and to make art, but also to consider the bigger issues that are an issue all over the region.

**D. Grant Design**

The last subject to be discussed is how funding and support is distributed. Equity issues affect rural communities much like other marginalized communities, such as people of color, women, and people who are low income. There is a larger discussion in the philanthropy sector that discusses equity in funding for marginalized communities. From time to time, the rural gets included in the conversation, but not consistently.

**Rural Arts Funding and Social Issues**

Problems and populations within most rural communities should be considered marginalized when discussing equity because of the following:

- Proportion of aging population
- Poverty levels
- Inequitable distribution of resources
- Funding structures preventing resources to get to those communities

Therefore, the marginalization lens will be used in discussing grant funding and resource distribution, from this point forward. When Le (2016) refers to funding of marginalized communities, he suggests that the philanthropic sector provide significant amounts of funding:

> Grant makers talk about equity a lot, yet they still tend to support large, established organizations with which they have relationships. These organizations play an important role and provide critical services, but a basic tenet of equity is that the people most affected by injustice should be leading efforts to address it (par. 9).

Much like other marginalized communities, the rural is not necessarily wanting to identify with negative stereotypes, yet they do want to at least start addressing the systems that are in place keeping this divide in place. In a 2017 report, *Creative MN*, the needs of artists featured a breakdown of greater Minnesota, artists identifying as people of color, and artists identifying as white. Each category had an explanation of what these artists needed (Figure 2).


Figure 2. (Creative MN report, 2017, p 22)

What seemed to be a simple descriptor of artist needs was actually problematic when discussing the complexity of Greater Minnesota Artists. When considering the idea of identifying rural artists as marginalized the descriptive terminology changes, but the needs are similar as artists of color. Yet, due to the likely geographic proximity of those surveyed, reflects in their feedback. For instance, when greater Minnesota artists want more access to markets and audiences that could be based on their location. When artists of color want education for gatekeepers and others in the sector that may be related to their proximity to urban funders, also a location issue. What is problematic with the data from the CreativeMN report is the assumption that Greater Minnesota is white, so when the report says, under "white artists," that they need networks and connections, it would likely assume the greater Minnesota artists fall into that category, which is inaccurate. As found in *Rural Philanthropy: Building Dialogue from Within,* "Without local support

systems, such as peer networks, technical assistance providers, sector research organizations, consultants, and legal experts, rural organizations often do not have access to the resources necessary to support those efforts" (Swierzewski, 2007, p. 17). If both groups in the Creative MN surveys addressed issues of *local support systems* as defined by Swierzewski, would the rural artists and artists of color have more in common? By framing the equity question differently, would the foundations and resources have a better results when reaching underrepresented populations, including rural populations? Beyond funding, the lack of support systems is a barrier in place that prevents resources, knowledge, and success to organizations, artists, and communities within rural communities.

**Intermediaries**

The use of intermediaries to distribute funding and valuable resources, are often times used in the arts. As mentioned in the literature review, an intermediary may be insufficient if they lack appropriate knowledge, are not invested in the given community, or are competing for the same funds as the organizations they are serving. In the case of Minnesota Regional Arts Councils, who may be seen as an intermediary, these issues may, or may not be, the case. The way the system works is very well run but there is one issue that became clear during the interview and survey process of this project: Are the regional arts councils, without lynchpin organizations, put in a role that requires that they have more knowledge and experience beyond their initial task at hand: to manage state funding? Artists and organizations need monetary support, yes, but there are other developmental aspects of their work that funding organizations do not provide. Artists, in particular, benefit from conversations with art collectors, curators, and critics. Organizations need assistance with governance, evaluation, and technology. The funders can only do so much. The knowledge also needs to be equitably shared.

In rural communities, an intermediary besides the regional arts council is necessary to provide the other tools that are easily accessed in urban areas. The urban organizations, that provide such services need an intermediary that provides the knowledge, network, and insight to pass on that information. This would then fulfill an urban organizational role as a statewide organization.

## V. Limitations

The capacity to implement a deep study of bias within the arts, especially in its relationship with rural communities was limited. The discussions were rich and many questions were raised, and most of the information did not fit within the context of this paper. The feedback from those surveyed could be part of a focus group methodology, but with the intention for the funders to do some deep thinking about how their current practices impact the rural, or any marginalized population.

Having purposely listened to those at the grassroots level, there is a stronger voice for those impacted by philanthropy and support in rural communities. Further research would include more of those voices to feed the funder's strategic goals, and also to be engaged in the change methods.

In the midst of interviews and surveys, it became obvious that more people could be interviewed. The approach was meant to be open interviews and qualitative surveys in order to find initial themes and potential connections that are difficult to quantify. Therefore, another series of surveys and interviews focusing on very specific questions around the themes of funding, bias, and identity would be helpful.

The last limitation is as much part of the philanthropic oversight as it is a limit in this research: artists know what they need. Surveys only capture a glimpse of these needs at a given

point. When discussing the overall art career, the limits are found in the assumption that arts validators see what or how they need to succeed. When they say they need space and time to create, and do not trust them to create in that time and space, we are not trusting them.

Further research is needed in the vast area of arts education. The fact that a majority of surveyed individuals brought up the lack of funding in the arts education programs in rural communities means that that is a worthy cause to examine.

Also, arts education is a major part of arts programming in art centers, and a great way to engage with aging populations. The demographics of rural communities consist of mostly youth in the schools and elders, therefore this part of the arts sector needs more time and attention.

Additional research looking at group dynamics of grants panels and community feedback would assist this discussion of inequity. Looking at equity from the group dynamic perspective, sitting in and documenting grant panels as they discuss grants, would provide some new information on this conversation.

While bias may never be eliminated, it can be prevented if some aspects of stating bias as fact happen regularly. This type of study would likely include resources from sociology, psychology, or political science. It would require observations and documentation of panels, followed by analysis in a variety of academic contexts.

A very important aspect of the interviews that would be worth exploring was the humanity involved in the issues of capacity. Too often, reflections via the surveys emphasized that the person/people implementing arts programming were always at risk of burn out. The concern was stated, but the solutions were not obvious. Would money be the answer? Capacity issues often get looked at from the top down, but it would be worth exploring what capacity looks like from the ground up.

## VI. Conclusions and Recommendations

In conclusion, as rural communities continue to decline, it is likely that rural arts and culture will also decline, unless rural communities and philanthropic partners start a new approach to funding discrepancies. Upon completion of this research, the following suggestions surfaced: philanthropic vehicles, funding panels, and sector conversations need to consider the rural as marginalized communities, approach the intermediary organization differently, and think deeply about how the funding sector is distributing funds.

Start defining rural communities as marginalized, and include their leadership, artists, and stakeholders as part of the discussion in funding equity. When the *equity conversation* is so similar, it only makes sense to have marginalized groups at the same table. Fund artists directly, that are doing work in rural communities. Don't make organizations and artists fight for the same funds. Think Deeply about how panels are run, and when geographic bias comes into play, then question why and how that impacts long term goals of funding equity.

Rural communities should put the livelihood of the people within your community first, and then look at the space and place they live. This gathering of assets will lead them to a narrative worth telling. By understanding the wholeness of their community, pools of funding will present themselves, advocating will be more focused, and community-based work will more continuous.

Collaboratively and organizationally, consider the strength of the lynchpin organization, which is not meant to replace existing production organizations (like a theater or art center), but provides an essential component in arts and community connectivity. Yet, the existence of a lynchpin organization is not to be seen as competition. They are meant to be a capacity building tool for all organizations, artists, and community entities. If you do not have the lynchpin

organization, then rally the artists to be those lynchpins. Support them and see their success as being success for the entire community.

As for artists in rural communities, and anyone considering working within small communities, consider the following quote by Theaster Gates, from a panel discussion at the 2016 Aspen Ideas Festival,

> Can you draw a line around a place, and say this place matters? And then jump in the middle of it and roll up my sleeves and keep doing things until things starts to happen … get dirty vs. run feels like an important part of the practice (Aspen Ideas Festival, 2016).

While Gates does most of his work in Chicago, this idea of *get dirty or run* holds true of any artist, any place. Artists have an opportunity to work in rural communities not because they are inspirational, but because they *matter.* There is work to be done, and it is not going to be easy. Finding the support, vocabulary, and manpower to make things happen will always be a challenge.

Yet, it will be worth it.

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